

Part Two

Tuesday, August 19, 2003

A joyful surprise on the phone

By COURTNEY PEIFER

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

The phone call in the middle of the night.

That call that sounds the moment when your life irrevocably changes, when you can bisect your life into the before and the after.

My call came at 2:45 a.m.

"I'm sorry to call you so late, but I have very exciting news," said Elliott Kim, a member of the Washington Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs.

Kim said his friend, Lt. Kwon Teh-il of the Korean National Police, "had tried his best to find my relatives" -- and he had.

I had been looking for three years without success. It took Kwon three hours.

Two weeks before we were set to go to Seoul to search for three siblings, Kwon had located them. My older sister, who was married with two sons and living in Incheon. Two brothers, both single, living in Seoul.

And suddenly the family portrait shifted: An 87-year-old grandfather, who hadn't been mentioned in my adoption records and hadn't existed to me until that moment, was living in Daebu, the town where I was born.

Then Kim paused. I could almost hear the caution behind his voice. I held my breath. My birth mother, who had abandoned us 26 years before, had also been found. She is remarried and living in Seoul.

I was stunned.

If I had thought my siblings were impossible to relocate, I had always thought that locating my mother was two steps farther than that. So it never had occurred to me to try. Not once. And apparently she was in contact with my older sister, whose name I had not known. Suddenly my sister was one phone call away.



Family Tree. Korean: See a photo of Courtney Peifer's Korean family, taken before she was born, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A2)



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtney, left, and Lindsay Peifer didn't know the name of the sister who remained in Korea, and now they are talking to her on the phone. "I can't thank God enough that you're still alive," their sister Kim Jong Sook said through an interpreter in their emotion-filled conversation.

The Korean Ministry of Trading and Foreign Affairs, who received my search inquiry from the Korean Consulate General's Seattle office, determined that it had "come to be impossible" to locate my three siblings.

But Kim and Lieutenant Kwon proved the ministry wrong.

Kim had become my big brother by chance. I was seeking an interpreter for my pending trip to South Korea and he unraveled a bureaucracy.

When a colleague contacted Kim for help, Kim said I needed more than an interpreter, I needed someone who understood Korea's child welfare system. Luckily, he said, he was that someone.

I was a bundle of nervous momentum when we met, more eager than any child at Christmas dawn. I had an expert -- someone who had been a social worker in Korea -- in front of me and he was reading my case history.

He laughed, his eyes dancing as I repeatedly interrupted him to pepper him with questions and said, "I must read through your whole file first."

"Of course," I said, also laughing at my eagerness. I waited a few moments, watching him read line by line.

"See this name here?" he said, pointing to Dr. Kim Duk Whang, president of Eastern Child Welfare Society who was appointed my legal guardian while we were in the care of his adoption agency. "He was my father's best friend. Their names were very similar and they would tease each other about who was the younger brother."

Kim beamed and said, "You have a very good story and I will help you."

I beamed back. This was the closest link, the best lead I had ever had.

I rushed over to my boss and declared: "I've just hit the lottery."

But even though Kim had established a personal connection to my case, I told myself that the most I could hope for was that the trail wasn't cold, that Kim could connect me to someone who could lead me one step closer. I had no idea I was at marathon mile 26 and the finish line was just a breath away.

Less than 36 hours after that meeting, Kim picked up the phone and called me in the middle of the night.

Catching myself

Growing up, I didn't feel my identity was in doubt. I knew I was an American girl who was Korean. The only confusion I had about being adopted was why all the other kids in class also weren't adopted. Wasn't that the way it worked? What was wrong with those kids?

But I did feel a fracture, a disconnect between life before age 3 1/2 and since. Because that's when the paper trail begins,

where the photo albums begin, where my life begins -- my American life with a new name, a new family, a new birth certificate.

And I felt like it made me an impostor, a liar. I was living a charmed life in America, but in ways I felt I didn't deserve it -- this life that offered so much more than I assumed my Korean family had. I was the Frank Abagnale Jr. of my life - with my Luxembourgian name and a Minnesota lilt -- and I was hoping to catch up with myself.

Even simple questions led to lies. Ask me how many siblings I have and I'll have to do the math; do I tell the long version or the short? Most often I told the short version -- two sisters -- and felt like a liar.

I felt I was about to connect both stories and find answers: How did I get those scars on the back of my head? Do my Korean siblings even remember me? They were 6, 10 and 13 years old when Lindsay and I left. How did that shape their lives?

Within 36 hours of Kim's call, Lindsay flew to Seattle so we could call our sister in Korea together.

A crew of us assembled for the call, including interpreters and documenters. I was nervous as I leaped into the unknown.

It began with photographs. Kwon e-mailed photos of my family from the National Identification List.

First was my paternal grandfather. Lindsay and I stared. I had trouble seeing anyone other than a stranger. Until I saw his dimples.

"He has dimples just like you," I exclaimed to Lindsay.

And suddenly I saw other things. She has his eyes, his nose, the outline of his face.

Then a sister. And I could see a version of Lindsay there as well.

A brother. "Oh, he wears glasses just like us," I said.

And our mother. And in her, I saw myself. Her jaw was the one on which I rested my hands. Her cheekbones the ones I highlighted.

A distant call to childhood

The call to Korea was late.

"I can't thank God enough that you're still alive," my older sister said, through an interpreter.

Despite a language barrier, she communicated perfectly when her voice broke. Lindsay was soon in tears as well. When we hadn't called at the designated time, each minute became an eternity until our older sister was sure "something went wrong."

Her name is Kim Jong Sook. Her voice is sweet, somehow of goodness like summertime.

At first the three of us were speechless. We had thought of questions to ask, but now they now seemed inappropriate or superficial. Where do you start to fill in 25 years?

We started with childhood.

Jong Sook, whose name I had not known until that week, told us how the three of us played together -- we didn't have many toys and our brothers were in school, she explained; how my twin would follow me around, catching my sniffles as she went; how the younger twin had a chubby face and the older twin had a thinner face so everyone thought the older twin was prettier.

"That's me," I exclaimed, the memory returning. "I'm the chubby one!"

We all laughed, especially me because I knew Lindsay had momentarily forgotten she was older. (I had spent so many years both bossing and caring for her that she was known as the younger twin until we were about 9 and we read our adoption records more carefully.)

Jong Sook clarified our history. The five of us lived with our grandfather -- not our uncle, as we had thought -- after our mother left. We were split up after Grandfather remarried in 1978. The three oldest remained with Grandfather and Lindsay and I went to an orphanage.

"When did Mother come back?" I asked.

Lee Soon Nam, our birth mother, had visited Daebu, and left her phone number in case Jong Sook wanted to contact her. It was four years after Lindsay and I were adopted, five years after she had left. When Jong Sook graduated from elementary school, she traced Soon Nam's address through the number. She said the whole family now celebrates holidays together.

Jong Sook said she had been looking for us.

"Do you remember the boat?" she asked. "Uncle took you on a boat."

It was the last time she saw us, the day we disappeared from her life. She tried to trace us through our uncle, but "it didn't work out."

"When is your birthday?" Jong Sook asked.

Instantly there was confusion after we told her. She spoke and the translators asked her more questions and Lindsay and I looked around waiting for someone to explain.

She doesn't think that's your right birthday, the commissioner said. She thinks you are older.

Despite some inaccuracies of our adoption records there was enough that proved true --about grinding our teeth at night, that Lindsay was having difficulty adjusting to the

babies' home and was depressed, that I enjoyed snacks -- that we believed most of the report.

We could pinpoint things in the adoption records that were deniable: that Lindsay knew how to draw, do "easy errands well," play games and dance -- all of which she excels at now, but my parents laughingly learned wasn't the case then; or that we spoke Korean when in fact we spoke our own twin language. But we considered them exaggerations rather than lies.

As Jong Sook's stories loosened memory, it also shook loose doubt on what I had known as truth. There were so many new questions.

And now that I knew I was going to meet my Korean family I wondered whether I was prepared to walk into the past. Is there a certain résumé that you must have completed to be worthy to stand before the family who gave you up, let you go, because their hopes for your future were greater than their sorrow or fears?

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A moment with ... Elliott Kim, state Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs

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Commissioner Elliott Kim of the State of Washington Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs became the crucial link to reunite two American women with their Korean family. Born in Seoul, he came to the United States about 20 years ago "for a better life and opportunity for my family." Kim and his wife, Sylvia, a clinical pharmacologist, have a son, Mitchell, 16. They live in Dupont.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Elliott Kim explains to Courtnay, left, and Lindsay Peifer about their family tree on the Internet. Kim is the man who helped find Courtnay and Lindsay's biological family in South Korea.

Why did you start in social work: "I had a lot of influence from my parents even when I was young. My father is a very historical man for Korean social work service. People call him a founding father for Korean National Social Work Service. He was an active participant of establishment of Daegu University in southern Korea. He was a professor, a pastor and social worker. He is a founder of the Daegu Social Work Foundation and he donated almost all of his money to that, which currently I'm a member of the board of trustees."

How many reunion cases have you been involved with: "A long time ago, we had an orphan shelter and day care center. My parents helped support over 400 orphans for long-term care (over 10 years). I used to observe an

uncountable amount of reunions ... I actively helped several dozens of cases."

What advice would you give Korean adoptees?: "I would tell them to please understand that their relatives may have great guilt because they left their offspring. I would tell them to respect their family's psychological feelings."

What philosophy do you live by?: "Meeting is the greatest theme of all human beings' existence. ... Karma is one of the most important aspects of human life."

Other comments: "I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all the adopting parents. Their heartbreaking dedication, sacrifice and love has changed hundreds of thousands of young adoptees' lives for the better. I want to say as Koreans, some of our people have neglected, abused, abandoned, or had to give away their children and many Americans gave up something in order to show them unconditional love. This is one of the 20th century's greatest accomplishments. ... In my opinion, all adopting American parents are heroes."

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A moment with ... Lt. Kwon Teh-il, Korean National Police

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Korean National Police Lt. Kwon Teh-il, a 29-year police veteran, is the section chief of the white-collar crimes unit at Daegu West Metropolitan Police Department. Kwon and his wife have three children.

How many families have you helped reunite?

"Uncountable, but I recently helped a grandma in Los Angeles find her granddaughter in Korea and helped a third-generation Korean Chinese who was looking for relatives in South Korea."

Is navigating through the system complex for anyone or just foreigners? "The most important thing is to have

accurate clues and information. For foreigners, it may be a little difficult because many times their Korean National ID number and adoption records aren't remaining, so their family information may be unknown. But even if it's a very old record, if they have just a little accurate clue, it will be helpful."



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtney Peifer thanks Lt. Kwon Teh-il for finding her Korean family as she says goodbye to him at the police station in Daegu, Korea. It took Kwon three hours to locate Courtney and Lindsay's family.

Would a Korean national understand how to navigate the system to locate relatives without official help? "Korean Broadcast System has a special family search program called 'Ahchim Madang' every Wednesday from 8:30-9:30 a.m. which has a section called 'Missing them.' There are also such Internet search sites as: www.esan.co.kr, www.bogopa.co.kr, www.mannam.co.kr, www.reunion.unikorea.go.kr."

What philosophy do you live by: "Thinking positively and willingness to help others."

How were you able to locate the Kims: "The problem was, all of them didn't reside in the address that was in the Police Identification List and nobody listed their home phone numbers in their name. Due to the fact that they don't reside in the address listed, the Ministry of Trading and Foreign Affairs couldn't track them. I expanded my search to their marital partners and finally, I was successful."

Other comments: "First of all, as a Korean, I want to show much of my appreciation to Courtney and Lindsay's American parents who cared for them greatly. Please don't forget your parents, and I hope because of the reunion opportunity you can share your love with your entire family."

-- Courtney Peifer